



Upper
Mississippi River
Basin Association

ILLINOIS, IOWA, MINNESOTA, MISSOURI, WISCONSIN

August 31, 2000

Mississippi River/Gulf of Mexico Action Plan (4503F)
c/o U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
1200 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20460

To the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and Mississippi River/Gulf of Mexico
Watershed Nutrient Task Force:

The Upper Mississippi River Basin Association (UMRBA) is submitting these comments in response to the "Notice of Availability and Request for Comment" on the draft Mississippi River/Gulf of Mexico Action Plan published in the July 11, 2000 *Federal Register*. These comments are supplementary to, but are in no way a substitute for, any individual comments submitted by the UMRBA's five member states.

In the comments that the UMRBA submitted last December on the Integrated Assessment, we recommended that the Action Plan build upon the principles presented by the Coordination Committee at the Task Force's November 18, 1999 meeting. Those principles state that the Action Plan should include:

- A goal that clearly states what outcomes the action plan is designed to achieve (it need not be a numeric goal)
- A reasonable timeframe for implementation and evaluation
- Flexibility in implementation
- Enhanced monitoring and analysis
- Enhanced resources to effectively carry out whatever plan is ultimately agreed upon

The draft Action Plan published in the July 11, 2000 Federal Register reflects some of these principles, but falls short of fully satisfying them in a number of key ways.

A goal that clearly states what outcomes the action plan is designed to achieve (it need not be a numeric goal) —

The draft Action Plan offers three options for the Coastal Goal. Option A calls for a reduction in annual discharges of nitrogen to the Gulf and Option B calls for a reduction in the size of the Gulf hypoxic zone. Both of these goals clearly articulate a desired outcome. By defining the outcome rather than the process, these options hold greater promise for measuring progress and ultimate success than does Option C. While less quantitative, the

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“Within Basin Goal” and “Quality of Life Goal” are also important, in so far as they clearly state that the Action Plan is not only intended to improve conditions in the Gulf of Mexico, but also in the Mississippi River Basin. The ultimate success of the Implementation Actions recommended in the draft plan will depend in large part on their demonstrated ability to improve the environmental and economic health of the basin where most of the actions are to be implemented.

A reasonable timeframe for implementation and evaluation —

The timeframes associated with the Implementation Actions in the draft Action Plan are ambitious. While they are laudable targets, they may prove to be unrealistic, particularly if adequate funding is not made available on a timely basis. Of particular concern is the timeframe for Action #2, which calls for the establishment of nutrient reduction targets and strategies for sub-basins by Fall 2001. Perhaps the greatest challenge of the entire strategy set forth in the Action Plan will be the planning work to be done at the sub-basin level. Much of this work will be the responsibility of states, local units of government, and local watershed organizations. This will require extensive public outreach and stakeholder involvement, which has not been done thus far in developing the larger scale, more conceptual Action Plan. It is unrealistic to assume that the sub-basin planning work, which will serve as the foundation for future management actions and budget decisions, can be accomplished in such a short period of time.

Flexibility in implementation —

The underlying philosophy of the draft Action Plan is adaptive management, whereby the results of monitoring and research are used to refine and adjust future management actions. This iterative and flexible approach is critical in addressing the very complex nature of nutrient cycling and transport, particularly given the widely-recognized scientific uncertainties surrounding these issues.

The draft Action Plan also appropriately recognizes the need for flexibility by offering a wide range of potential implementation actions that address the variety of nutrient sources and management solutions. Local watersheds throughout the Basin will have different problems and opportunities. It is thus extremely important that the Action Plan maintain its emphasis on a flexible and comprehensive range of tools, including ones that address both point and nonpoint sources of nutrients, as well as those that enhance denitrification and nitrogen retention.

This type of flexibility should also be reflected in the section of the Action Plan that outlines the institutional framework for implementation. In particular, the presumption that the Task Force should establish sub-basin committees (Implementation Action #1) requires further discussion and consideration. It is obvious that the broad concepts and strategies embodied in the Action Plan will need to be translated into more detailed strategies and

actions at the sub-basin scale. However, it is not obvious that the most appropriate way to accomplish this is by creating new organizations and institutional structure. Using existing watershed organizations, many of which already serve as the basis for on-going state and local efforts, may be preferable.

Enhanced monitoring and analysis —

The draft Action Plan recognizes the critical need for enhanced monitoring and research. Such efforts are essential to the adaptive management approach. As the Action Plan recognizes, increased monitoring is needed both within the Basin to more fully understand nutrient sources, fate, and transport, as well as in the Gulf to better understand the dynamics of the hypoxic zone.

Enhanced resources to effectively carry out whatever plan is ultimately agreed upon —

The draft Action Plan proposes a budget initiative consisting of seven “funds.” Each fund would presumably provide financial resources to support various existing federal programs that would be the basis for implementing the monitoring, research, and implementation actions outlined in the plan. In addition, the budget initiative recognizes the important need for financial resources to support the planning, coordination, and stakeholder involvement that will be required. Despite the lengthy description of these funds, it is not clear that this budget initiative will result in any additional new resources. Using existing programs is a fundamentally sound approach. However, simply using existing resources will not be sufficient. The states’ experience has been that federal budget “initiatives” such as the one described in the draft Action Plan, frequently represent only a re-labeling of existing funding sources, often accompanied by the assumption or explicit direction that they be prioritized to address a certain problem. If, in fact, the “Clean Rivers/Clean Gulf Budget Initiative” does not result in additional funds specifically for this Basin, it will do little to address the complex problem of nutrient enrichment in the Basin and Gulf.

In closing, the Upper Mississippi River Basin Association reaffirms its commitment to working with the Mississippi River/Gulf of Mexico Watershed Nutrient Task Force and the full range of potentially affected stakeholders to develop a consensus, science-based Action Plan to meet the needs of the Basin and the Gulf.

Sincerely,



Holly Stoerker
Executive Director

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